

You Collect What?

By Debi Raitz

Chances are, when most collectors answer that question, the person who asked it knows exactly what the item is. However, if the answer is “Open salts,” most people will pose another question, “What’s that?” Many of today’s collectibles have as their roots a somewhat less sophisticated form, but still recognizable as the same item. But open salts have been off most dinner tables and out of daily use in the USA for a hundred years already. Once a method was invented to prevent ordinary table salt from caking up and hardening, salt shakers practically replaced open salts overnight. Unless you and your grandmother were both around in the 1950s or so, you may have never even heard of open salts.

Open salts, salt cellars, salt dips, salt dishes, or whatever else they may be called, is probably one of the oldest items known to man. Salt was a highly regarded commodity and basically, you couldn’t live without it. Going way back, Roman soldiers were paid in salt, or given *salarium argentums* with which they could buy salt. That’s the basis for the word salary used today. There are many references to salt in old sayings such as “not worth his salt” that refers to the amount of salt paid for a slave. One could easily research the history of salt itself, but I’d like to focus on the dishes that held the salt. As long as salt has been used throughout the centuries, it was kept in some form of a salt cellar.

With our rather short history in the world when compared to the UK, Europe and other nations, one can understand why the US history in making open salts would also be shorter. In Colonial times, there were hand carved and lathe turned wooden salt cellars (treenware), some handmade pewter and even some elaborate silver salts.



Beginning about 1825, glass table salts evolved from a rather clunky appearance to a more delicate form known as Lacy glass. These were made by many companies in the Pittsburgh area in addition to Boston & Sandwich, New England and other companies in the East. Open salts of the same general shapes and designs were simultaneously being produced in France and Finland. Today Lacy salts, especially colored glass ones, are highly sought after and revered by collectors.



European countries continued to use open salts longer than we did (old habit perhaps?), but the form was usually two small open dishes joined together. They held salt and pepper. Doubles, as they are called by collectors, were definitely more plentiful in countries other than the USA.



Foreign countries are the origin of the truly antique open salts that collectors can still find today. Old Delft, French faience and Chinese export porcelain salt cellars made prior to 1800 can be found with relatively little internet searching. Prices can be off the grid when it comes to these types, and reproductions are also out there. But there are high and low end items in most collecting categories, and that's what makes collecting fun is finding those treasures.



High and low end also means that anyone can collect open salts. There are virtually thousands of small glass open salts made by American companies that can still be picked up for just a couple dollars apiece. These are known as “individuals” as opposed to the larger “table” salts. Early American pattern glass (EAPG) graced tables across the country between the 1870s and 1900s. Virtually all of them included at least one form of table salt and also individual open salts. Contrary to what some people may say, it’s my belief that the companies offered the older form of the large table salt (those old habits again) and also the newer, more sanitary use of individual open salts. The hostess would have filled them with salt when the table was set. The table salt was not passed around so that guests could fill their individuals from the table salt. It was a matter of choice of the dinner hostess. Glass companies simply offered many different forms in the same pattern and the consumers purchased the plates, side plates, tumblers, butter dishes, relish dishes and other serving pieces they wanted.

So now that the very basic history of open salts is known, let’s look at what may find its way into most open salt collections. There is glass by Tiffany, Steuben and Mt. Washington of the US, Daum, Lalique and Baccarat of France, Webb in England, and many Bohemian companies including Moser and Lobmeyr. That’s just the cream of the crop. The number of open salts is staggering. You have probably seen them, but may not have known what they were. And that’s just the glass examples.



Salt cellars have been made of virtually any material you can think of including glass, wood, pewter, silver, gold, bronze, metal, enamel, porcelain, pottery, plastic, horn, ivory, shells and stone. So you can see the attraction these charming little bowls would hold whether you like them all, or would just prefer to collect one or two types. Most people begin collecting them all, and then concentrate on a favorite color or material. Most collectors I know have a favorite type, but we all have a little of everything. It’s just too hard not to!

Collecting salts is very easy because they are plentiful and small so they do not require much space. That is subject to change depending on the number you acquire, as is true of any collection. Two of the best books on the subject are *5000 Open Salts* by William Heacock and Patricia Johnson and *The Open Salt Compendium* by Sandra Jzyk and Nina Robertson. Both have thousands of open salts pictured for identification. While *5000 Open Salts* concentrates mostly on the identification of clear glass, *Open Salt Compendium* focuses more on higher end salt cellars.

There are several open salt collector clubs in the United States. There is also Open Salt Collectors National organization that promotes the hobby and currently produces two all color newsletters per year. Subscriptions are currently \$10/year and can be mailed to Open Salt Collectors, 4182 Bunker Hill Drive, Coopersburg, PA 19036.

There is a convention every two years and the next one is scheduled for September 2011 in Williamsburg, VA. My website is www.opensalts.us and we have a very active chat page and message board. We hope that if you collect these little gems, you'll go to the website and check us out. We have a lot of pictures and resources including an entire section on old catalogs from several different countries. Perhaps your interest may have been stirred just enough to learn more about open salts. They are definitely a collectible of bygone days, never to be in daily use again. Younger collectors today will never know of them unless we keep the interest in them alive.